Safety Takes a Risky Ride When Industries Police Themselves

Police Themselves

By Ann Brown

Thrill rides and roller coasters are safe. Medical and engineering studies say so.

Case closed?

Not quite. Some of the studies were paid for by people who own (and profit from) the thrill rides and roller coasters, to wit, Six Flags, the nation's largest amusement park company and operator of Magic Mountain in Valencia.

Even the report this week by the Brain Injury Assn. of America, which says the chances of brain injury from a roller coaster are remote, admits there are risks for some people, though more data are needed to figure out who.

Thrill rides are getting faster and more dangerous, producing more deaths and injuries. Yet when Rep. Edward J. Markey (D-Mass.) originally introduced legislation in 1999 to restore Consumer Product Safety Commission oversight for fixed-site rides, the industry testified against the legislation on Capitol Hill, effectively killing it.

Before 1981, the commission's oversight included both big theme parks and smaller traveling carnivals. The commission required the parks and carnivals to report injuries, mandated government safety inspections and conducted recalls of defective thrill rides.

But in 1981, the big theme parks cajoled Congress into granting theme parks an exemption from the law that required federal oversight. This created a major safety gap. Thirteen states have no injury-reporting requirements, and 11 states don't even require safety inspections. In fact, some big theme park states like Virginia, Florida and New York rely upon private safety inspectors accountable to no public safety authorities. California recently enacted legislation authorizing state inspections of fixed-site amusement park rides.

Through its independent surveys of hospital emergency rooms, the safety commission reports that theme park injuries increased 95% from 1996 to 1999. Moreover, in August 1999, four people were killed in three thrill ride incidents in Northern California, New Jersey and Virginia in the space of six days.

The thrill ride industry is not the only one with problems. Fires involving upholstered furniture kill more Americans than any other kind of consumer product-related fires, with nearly 500 deaths, more than 1,300 injuries and nearly $200 million in property damage annually.

People are dying. Just when will the government get tough?

The commission has kept this issue on its front burner for more than eight years. It began regulatory proceedings, studies and public hearings. Still, the industry has not adopted voluntary safety standards that could reduce deaths and injuries associated with these fires.

How about the gas-fired water heater industry? The open flame of gas-fired water heaters ignites gasoline or kerosene fumes, causing hundreds of deaths and horrible injuries each year. Yet the water heater industry blames consumers for storing gasoline too close to water heaters — not the heater design, for contributing to accidents.

The baby bath seat industry is yet another example of why the fox shouldn't guard the henhouse. These products caused 78 deaths and 110 nonfatal incidents from 1983 through May 2001.

As a result of poor safety design, the bath seats can topple over in a tub of water, drowning children. The industry's response was not to redesign the product but to flee the market. There are only two manufacturers of bath seats in the U.S., down from 10 in 1994, when the commission began working on the issue.

In July 2000, a consumer group petitioned the commission to ban bath seats. In 2001, the commission proposed safety standards because the industry hadn't acted. In the interim, 10 babies drowned. The commission has reviewed comments and could act this year. Let's hope it does; babies are still drowning.

No one is trying to ban thrill rides, traveling carnivals, upholstered furniture or water heaters. But we need effective oversight, and that doesn't mean self-oversight by the industries.

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